



A Life-long Love Affair With Golf

By Lori Ward Bocher

Al Vrana's interest in golf courses was triggered years before he served as president of the WGCSA in 1975 and 1976. His association with Meadowbrook Country Club in Racine began long before he was hired as its assistant superintendent in 1961.

You have to go way back to the 1920's when Al's family moved to the outskirts of Racine where a new golf course, Meadowbrook, was being built. Al was 5 or 6 years old at the time. "Of course, I'd sneak on the golf course when I was little," he laughs. And so began his love affair with golf.

"I was always interested in golf. I love golf," Al relates. "And I had a brother who was five years older and he always wanted to be a golfer, too. I kind of followed him."

In 1936, when he was 14 years old, he worked at the neighboring Meadowbrook Country Club as a caddie. "After I was done caddying I worked on the golf course trying to earn some playing privileges," Al points out. "I remember cutting the greens with those real old mowers that we had to crank up to start."

After graduating from high school, Al went to work in a factory until he was called into the service. "I went into the Navy and spent my time overseas in the Pacific war theater," he recalls. "I had quite a time there."

When he left the service in 1946 he returned to Racine where he worked as a machinist at an engineering firm. "As the years passed (1961) they needed an assistant superintendent at Meadowbrook County Club," Al explains. "I always was interested in golf and growing things."

"And I wanted to get out of the factory and into the fresh air," he continues. "I love nature. There was no way I was going to be stopped from taking that job even if I had to take quite a bit of a cut in wages. It was well worth it." And so he returned "home" to Meadowbrook.

Al worked under superintendent Ray Mertens, who also served a term as WGCSA president (Mertens is now deceased). When Mertens retired from



Al Vrana

Meadowbrook in 1967, Al was named superintendent—a job he held until his own retirement in January of 1983.

And what has he been doing since retirement? "I've been playing a lot of golf," he answers. But this time it's not at Meadowbrook; it's on the seven courses that are part of the Bella Vista retirement community in Arkansas where Al lives next door to his best friend and another WGCSA past president, Woody Voigt.

"We play quite a bit of golf and enjoy life," Al says of his retirement. He plays about three times a week except in the winter when he drops back to once a week. "It's better for my joints in the summer," he adds. "But one January I did play 20 times."

Al and his wife, Marge, also travel quite a bit. "We come back to Wisconsin once or twice a year just to see how things are," he says. "We still have five children and 10 grandchildren in Wisconsin. We've really got something to come back to." Four of the children live in Racine and one lives in Kenosha.

The Vranas have traveled elsewhere in the U.S.—to Florida, South Carolina, the East coast and Yellowstone, to name a few places. "We go on an aver-

age of at least one good trip a year," he says.

Besides golf and travel, Al also keeps busy working around the house. "Mostly outside, of course," he says. "I did all my own landscaping and so I keep that up. And I have a little garden. It's kind of like a hobby."

His landscaping plan didn't include much turf—only a small lawn in the back yard. "Otherwise the rest of it is in stone because I didn't want too much sod," he points out. "Too much work."

Less time in the yard means more time for playing cards. "We have a lot of good friends around here who we do things with," Al says.

Al and Marge chose to retire in Arkansas for a number of reasons. "We still have the four seasons here, but winter isn't so long and harsh," he points out. "Spring is so beautiful down here. And the fall extends so late into the year. Up in Wisconsin the winter is so long.

"We still see snow around here, but it's not very much," Al continues. "I didn't even bring a snow shovel when we moved. I don't need it. When the snow comes, it's gone in three days at the most."

The Vranas chose Arkansas for lifestyle reasons, too. "The taxes are lower in Arkansas," Al points out. "Everything seems to be so different down here. They have a different way of living. It's a lot easier. A lot cheaper, too."

Golf is one thing that is cheaper — only \$7 to play 18 holes at the courses in his retirement community (if you're a member of the Bella Vista Property Owners Association). But cheaper isn't always better.

"Really, there's no comparison between Wisconsin golf courses and those down here," Al says. "You have better soils for growing turf in Wisconsin. And you have better practices, too. You're more concerned about the maintenance of the course. Down here they seem to have a little different attitude."

"I don't know if it's the people they have working for them," Al wonders. "They get them off the street and pay them minimum wage. I don't think they really have the instructions to do the job the way it should be done. They could do a much better job."

Even though the courses pay less for labor and the players pay less for a round of golf, Al believes that a better effort in golf course maintenance could go a long way. "They don't seem to cut the grass down the way it should be for golfers," Al says. "They must have mostly high handicap golfers around here because they don't notice. But I do. And I wish it was a lot better."

"They don't cut the grass often enough," he adds with emphasis.

Al did try to help with the golf courses at one time. "I really wanted to get involved. I thought I could help. But the superintendents didn't appear to want to be helped. So I just keep my nose out of it unless asked," he says. He was, however, instrumental in persuading the board to construct new greens at Bella Vista Country Club.

Although he's enjoying retirement, Al still takes some time to remember his 22 years at Meadowbrook. "A lot of times I think about just being out there in the open, overseeing the golf course," he admits. "It gives me a nice feeling."

He also has fond memories of a colleague, John Crewe, who used to be superintendent at Racine Country Club. "He helped me develop into a golf course superintendent," Al recalls. "He'd come over and help me with a lot of things. He's still alive and in a nursing home, I understand. He's 93 or 94 years old. There aren't many people who'd remember him."

Since Al never had any formal education in turf management, he seized every opportunity to learn from others. "I had more practical experience than education," he points out. "And I always tried hard at whatever I did."

"The education I had came through articles, symposiums, educational seminars and short course turf schools," he

continues. "I still remember O. J. Noer giving lectures at the UW short course. I also read a lot of articles and listened to people who knew. A lot of times people don't listen too well. I listen to anybody because anything they say might help me improve."

And Al, in turn, helped improve new mowers. While at Meadowbrook, he especially enjoyed working with Roger Thomas to test new mowing equipment from the nearby Jacobsen plant. "They would bring out new equipment and we would try it," Al explains. "We told them whether or not it was good for the turf or maybe what improvements could be made on it. They listened."

Al liked the new tri-plex mowers. "They saved a lot of time and a lot of effort," he says. "My idea was to always see if you could get the best job done in the least amount of time."

He's a little envious of the new equipment that has emerged since his retirement. "Your equipment is so much greater now, does the job so much better," he believes. "I wish I'd had it when I was a golf course superintendent."

"You've also got better turf management practices now," Al adds. "The demand for high class grass is there."

Since retirement, Al misses his involvement with the WGCSA. "Once in a while I'd like to go to a meeting. But I'd only know a few guys there now. A couple of years ago I went to a meeting over at Onalaska where Pat Norton was. I enjoyed that."

He has noticed one big change with the association's meetings. "When we had our meetings the host clubs used to recognize the golf course superintendents like they were real happy to have us," Al recalls. "There was no charge for golf or carts. The only thing we had to pay for was the meals."

"Now it seems like you have to pay for the whole works when you go," he continues. "It really is a good thing for the clubs to have the superintendents there. They can look over the course and give good comments. I don't think the clubs see it that way."

Al still reads *The Grass Roots*, which was developed during his tenure as president of the WGCSA. "After I left, it kept getting better and better until Monroe took it over. Then it really turned into something," Al says.

"Boy, he's one great editor," he continues. "Several times I've wanted to write him a letter to tell him how great the articles are. He has a lot of the same feelings that I have."

As we concluded the telephone interview for this Personality Profile, I asked Al if there was anything he'd like to say. "I can't remember what I already told you!" he admitted with a big laugh. But then he added:

"One thing for sure is that the WGCSA is made up of a great bunch of professionals. I have made many friends and cherish all of the great memories I have had with those friends." 🌱



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